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Basic Course Forum

Using the Basic Course to Prepare Digital Natives for New Role as Reverse Mentors

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When Millennials began to enter the workforce in the mid-2000s, employers struggled to engage this indecisive group (i.e., job-hoppers). At the same time, they also battled the threat of a labor shortage due to the impending retirement of an aging baby-boomer workforce (Chaudhuri & Ghosh, 2012). Organizations began to combat both issues by embracing intergenerational learning programs focused on the strengths of each group (Gerpott et al., 2017; Greengard, 2002). One strategy that has proved valuable in popular press and among companies, although fairly absent from academic literature (Kaše et al., 2019; McCann, 2017), is *reverse mentoring*.

Murphy (2012) defined reverse mentoring as “the pairing of a younger, junior employee acting as mentor to share expertise with an older, senior colleague as the mentee” (p. 550). Reverse mentoring allows younger employees to share knowledge with organizational leaders while concurrently learning about the organization, developing social capital, and gathering experience. However, as time progressed, the foundations of reverse mentoring shifted.

First, telework has become more common (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019), making partnerships essential for seasoned employees unprepared to transition to the digital workplace. Second, a new generation, equipped with unique characteristics, has changed workforce dynamics. Generation Z, or those born after 1995, is largely

defined by an attachment to and sustained use of technology (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Their adolescent development within and through the digital world (i.e., as digital natives) perfectly positions them to share this technological expertise as reverse mentors; however, researchers also speculate that their frequent technology use leads to poor relational and social skills (Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018).

This is where the basic communication course (BCC) can help. Murphy (2012) identified five antecedent skills to reverse mentoring: individual differences, cross-generational differences, willingness to accept role reversals, interaction frequency, and trust and comfort. As educators, we can help Gen Z begin building the necessary skills to effectively communicate digital knowledge to future coworkers, managers, or supervisors without sacrificing learning outcomes for non-traditional students from other generations who are also enrolled in the course. Specifically, the BCC can prepare students for roles as reverse mentors by enhancing 1) communication competence and 2) instructional efficacy.

To start, instructors can highlight how communication competence, a topic already covered at length in many BCCs, will prepare students for addressing generational similarities and differences. Course units concerned with audience analysis stress the importance of recognizing and acknowledging various values or beliefs, regardless of generation. Therefore, as a means of using audience analysis to reinforce competent communication, BCC instructors can incorporate opportunities for students of all ages, including non-traditional students from other generations, to confront age-related differences. Instructors can integrate examples of communication with workplace leaders to highlight variability in knowledge and experience. They can also model the process by allowing students to demonstrate reverse mentoring practices on them. For instance, an assignment could ask students to explain how a specific technology improves a classroom process.

Next, instructors can reiterate how course concepts build instructional efficacy. Successful reverse mentoring partly depends on the mentor's ability to communicate technical knowledge in an intelligible way. Peer reviews and workshops give students practice for providing constructive comments that lead to effective instruction and individual growth. Students can translate these experiences to communicate feedback that enhances relationship quality and develops the mentee's technological competence. Additionally, instructional efficacy might be developed by further promoting principles of organization and clarity. If students (i.e., mentors) want their audience (i.e., mentees) to comprehend their information, content must be communicated with a logical organizational structure that reduces cognitive load

(Bolkan, 2016). This could be the difference between a failed reverse mentoring experience and one that leads to leadership opportunities.

Keep in mind that to build efficacy, instructors must facilitate reflection and scaffold assignments purposefully (Frey & Vallade, 2018). Instructors can integrate short activities requiring students to reflect on connections between content and future applications to other contexts and scenarios (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Guest visits from professionals who have experienced the bi-directional benefits of intergenerational learning might also prompt students to recognize the importance of effective communication in the workplace. In either case, scaffolding opportunities for reflection will not detract from the skill development sought in BCCs and should ultimately benefit Gen Z students by capitalizing on their nuanced abilities.

The BCC is in position to help Gen Z, as digital natives, distinguish themselves through their ability to effectively instruct individuals from different generations. Murphy (2012) poignantly noted that reverse mentoring may be the very first mentoring experience for many of our students. By slightly adjusting our existing pedagogy, we can cultivate Gen Z's mentoring capacity and better prepare students to contribute immediately upon entering the workforce.

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